



United States Department of Agriculture
Forest Service

Beaver Meadows Campground Decommissioning Project

Decision Notice and Finding of No Significant Impact

Marienville Ranger District, Allegheny National Forest, Forest County, Pennsylvania

August 2021



Photo of Beaver Meadows Site 5 in 2013, two years after closure. Photo by Linda White, Recreation Planner.

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Introduction

This decision notice describes my rationale for selecting the proposed action alternative for the Beaver Meadows Campground Decommissioning project. This project will implement a portion of the recreation facilities analysis completed for the Allegheny National Forest in 2008. Proposed management activities are designed to contribute to achieving the desired condition outlined in the Allegheny National Forest Land and Resource Management Plan (or Forest Plan). This decision notice incorporates by reference the Beaver Meadows Campground Decommissioning Environmental Assessment.

Project Area

The project area encompasses the Beaver Meadows Campground within the Beaver Meadows Recreation Area on the Marienville Ranger District. The project is in Warrant 3185, Jenks Township, Forest County, Pennsylvania, approximately four miles north of Marienville, Pennsylvania. The campground lies within Management Area 3.0–Even-aged Management. The Beaver Meadows campground was constructed by the Forest Service in the 1960s and was in use until 2011 when it was closed because of continued low occupancy use rates.

Purpose and Need

In 2008, the Forest Service completed a recreation facility analysis for the Allegheny National Forest. The recreational facility analysis was designed to help the Forest Service align its developed recreation sites with the unique characteristics of the Allegheny National Forest, projected recreation demands, visitor expectation, and revenue opportunities.

The recreation facilities analysis for the Allegheny National Forest showed that the campground part of Beaver Meadows Recreation Area was under-utilized on all scales of measurement – local, regional, and national. The analysis recommended two options for the Beaver Meadows Campground:

- study the area and determine if it was a suitable location for conversion to an ATV campground, or
- if that was not feasible, decommission the campground and remove all its assets.

Conversion of the Beaver Meadows Campground to an ATV campground was considered but dropped from consideration for the reasons discussed below in the Alternatives Considered but Eliminated from Detailed Study section of this environmental assessment. Conversion to an ATV campground is not feasible.

Decision

After reviewing the environmental analysis, supporting documents and public response, I have decided to implement the proposed action alternative as described on pages 2–3 of the environmental assessment.

My decision and findings are based on my expertise and knowledge of the area, as well as that of the interdisciplinary team that developed and analyzed the project, the environmental assessment, the project biological assessment and evaluation, the project record, and the Forest Plan.

My decision is to decommission the Beaver Meadows Campground, which will include the following:

- Removing the storage building, three toilet buildings, playground equipment, all campsite equipment, all internal gates, the gate at campground entrance, pay phone, all buried utility lines, and any other equipment associated with the camping area.
- Decommissioning (full obliteration) all roads within the campground beyond the intersection with the main day use area road and including all spur roads to individual campsites including removal of road surfacing and culverts.
- Plugging all water wells.

Please note that this decision does **not** include the Beaver Meadows Day Use Area or hiking trails. The day use parking area, toilet, boat access, picnic areas, bank fishing, pathway across the dam, hiking trails and access to hiking trails will continue to be maintained for public use. The blueberry site will remain unaffected and access will be by foot from the day use area.

The project includes the removal of the storage building and three toilet buildings. The three toilet buildings are structurally sound and could be moved to other locations on the Allegheny National Forest, if possible. However, the storage building is in poor condition and will be demolished, with the material going to an approved landfill. The toilet vaults will be pumped dry and cleaned of any remaining waste material. The vaults will then be broken up and buried and the sites restored to natural conditions. Information kiosks will have their electrical components removed and will be relocated to the Little Drummer Trailhead, Spring Creek Horse Trailheads, or other trailheads where needed.

Virtually all the usable campsite furniture (fire rings and picnic tables) has already been removed and dispersed to other campgrounds on the forest. The remaining unusable equipment (mainly wooden picnic tables that are in poor condition) will be disposed in an approved landfill. Wooden site number posts will be removed and disposed.

Culverts under site spurs and the loop roads will be removed. Camp sites and loop and spur roads will be restored to natural conditions. Disturbed soils will be seeded with native species and mulched.

Water wells will be plugged, hydrants removed, and pipes capped. If necessary, some pipes may be removed to allow roads and pads to be restored to natural conditions, but the rest will remain buried to limit ground disturbance. Disturbed soils will be seeded with native species and mulched.

Non-native invasive plant treatments were initiated in the summer of 2019 (approved in the Salmon East decision). Follow-up treatments occurred in the summer of 2020. The site will be monitored to ensure that non-native invasive plant treatments are successful and that these non-native invasive plant species do not re-establish themselves. Additional treatments may be necessary.

Reasons for the decision

The purpose and need for the project include six components intended to establish and maintain a sustainable developed recreation infrastructure on the Allegheny National Forest. These components contribute to the fiscal integrity of the Allegheny National Forest by formally closing and decommissioning a disused facility. In addition, these components contribute to the restoration of habitat and healthy forest within the project area and on the Allegheny National Forest as a whole. Based on my review of the proposed action, the affected environment and guidance contained in the Forest Plan, I have made the following determinations:

- The proposed action reduces deferred recreation infrastructure maintenance by removing underutilized, obsolescent, redundant, and dilapidated structures and equipment, thus allowing funds that might have been allocated to the restoration of this facility to be used for the maintenance or restoration of other recreation facilities that are in greater demand or better meet recreation needs on the Allegheny National Forest.
- The proposed action restores non-forested land to a vegetated condition that contributes to habitat diversity and a resilient forest.
- The proposed action contributes to achieving specific objectives for the management area as described in the Forest Plan.
- The proposed action is consistent with strategies described in the Forest Plan, which are relevant and specific to the affected resources and resource concerns.
- The proposed action incorporates all relevant design criteria that are consistent with standards and guidelines from the Forest Plan.
- The proposed action is similar to other projects that decommission obsolescent infrastructure on the Allegheny National Forest, including roads, buildings and other constructed features that have outlived their utility or for which the cost of reconstruction or replacement outweighs the benefit or potential use associated with the features.

I have given careful consideration to recent increases in visits to the Allegheny National Forest and to public lands around the state and the nation. There is evidence that the public turned to the relative safety of outdoor recreation as a response to the Covid-19 pandemic and the restrictions placed on contact and interaction. This has been a positive development for public lands, as people reconnect with and gain new appreciation for this enduring resource that belongs to all Americans. Many new visitors will continue to value and utilize the Allegheny National Forest (and other public lands), and this will certainly increase use of the many recreation opportunities and facilities provided on the Allegheny National Forest. However, it remains to be seen how much and how sustained that increase will be once we move into a post pandemic period.

The trend of decreasing demand for the facilities provided at Beaver Meadows Campground has been decades in the making. It would not be wise to choose reinvestment in a historically underutilized facility based on a sudden change in demand, particularly when there is no evidence yet that the change will be sustained. Perhaps, it would make little difference if the Forest Service could operate and maintain underutilized facilities without concern for cost or resources. But the reality is that the Forest Service has much more deferred maintenance in recreation facilities that it can possibly hope to address, even with the emphasis of a Great American Outdoors Act and the funds it allocates to that very thing.

For the Allegheny National Forest, this means allocating whatever funding is received for reinvestment in infrastructure to those facilities that historically are utilized, are in demand, and do need improvement or replacement. This includes places like Kiasutha Recreation Area, Dew Drop Campground, Buckaloons Recreation Area, Irwin Run Canoe Launch, and other facilities where use and deterioration have strained the infrastructure, negatively impacted the recreation experience, and, in many cases, reduced public safety. It is not Beaver Meadows Campground. There are many who cherish this place and believe it still has utility as a campground, but they are few in comparison to those who use the other developed campgrounds on and around the Allegheny National Forest.

As a District Ranger, I have had to make some difficult decisions with regards to resource

management on the Marienville Ranger District. To some, these decisions may seem callous or short-sighted. I have learned in this position that there are some things worth fighting for, whether they are old traditions or new ideas; there are other things which are no longer viable or relevant and should be respectfully declined; and there are yet other things for which the time is not right and should be set aside until they are. The time for a Beaver Meadows Campground has passed. We can hang on to the idea of it, or hope for a different future for it, but we can't afford to pay for either, and the land on which it sits can be restored to productive forest and habitat. Beaver Meadows will still be a place to cherish, it just won't be a place to camp for the foreseeable future.

Considering all these factors, I am confident that the proposed action is well-grounded in the Forest Plan as a guiding document, consistent with recommendations from the 2008 Recreation Facilities Analysis, current with a sustainable recreation model emphasized in the Recreation Site Analysis ongoing in 2021, and all elements of the proposed action are responsive to the purpose and need for action.

Environmental Consequences

I have carefully reviewed the analysis framework and environmental consequences for each affected resource, and I considered the potential effects in the context of the intensity factors the effects analyses (Environmental Assessment, pages 5–15). I am also confident that resource specialists on the interdisciplinary team are familiar with potential effects. No evidence was revealed in any of the comments submitted during the designated 30-day comment period for the environmental analysis, nor is any evidence in the project record that indicates any substantial uncertainty or unknown risks regarding effects of the proposed action. The effects of the various elements of the proposed action are limited in scope. The interdisciplinary team considered the best available scientific information as well as opposing viewpoints to complete all components of the environmental analysis and support a finding of no significant impact.

Other Alternatives Considered

No other action alternatives were proposed by the interdisciplinary team or the responsible official based on potential resource conflicts, and none were generated by unresolved resource conflicts revealed after thorough review of public scoping comments. Two other alternatives were considered, but not fully analyzed. The rationales for why these alternatives were not considered in detail are disclosed on pages 3–4 of the environmental assessment. Because of this, only the proposed action and no action alternatives were fully analyzed. I have determined this range of alternatives is adequate and follows Forest Service environmental analysis regulations at 36 CFR 220.7 for consideration of alternatives.

No Action Alternative

The no action provides a baseline for comparison of potential effects from the proposed action. Under the no action alternative, the proposed activities would not occur. The Beaver Meadows Campground would not be decommissioned and would remain closed. The no action alternative was not selected because it would not meet the purpose and need for the project.

Tribal Consultation

The Forest Service is consulting with the Pennsylvania Historical and Museum Commission, the State Historic Preservation Office, and the following tribes: Absentee-Shawnee Tribe of Oklahoma, Cayuga Nation, Delaware Nation, Delaware Tribe of Indians, Eastern Shawnee Tribe of Oklahoma, Oneida Indian Nation, Oneida Nation of Wisconsin, Onondaga Nation, Seneca Nation of Indians, Seneca-Cayuga Tribe of Oklahoma, St. Regis Mohawk Tribe, Shawnee Tribe,

Stockbridge-Munsee Band of Mohican Indians, Tonawanda Band of Seneca, and Tuscarora Nation, in accordance with Section 106 of the National Historic Preservation Act of 1966, as amended in 1980 and 1992, and the regulations (36 CFR Part 800) of the Advisory Council on Historic Preservation. All proposed management activities in this project were reviewed by these tribes for potential effects to cultural resources.

Public Involvement

The Beaver Meadows Campground Decommissioning project was first listed in the Allegheny National Forest Schedule of Proposed Actions in the January 2020 issue. On November 26, 2019, a scoping package was mailed to interested individuals and organizations, including adjacent landowners and subsurface mineral owners, and posted on the Allegheny National Forest website on November 19, 2019. The public scoping period for the project ended on December 20, 2019. Comments were received from 16 individuals and organizations. These comments were analyzed by the interdisciplinary team, and the comments and responses are included in the environmental assessment (Appendix A–Scoping Comments Summary).

None of the scoping comments provided any new site-specific information, either in the form of focused, applicable peer-reviewed studies conducted at the local or regional level, or in the form of site or resource conditions not previously identified by the interdisciplinary team. Because of this, no alternatives to the proposed action were formulated to address the purpose and need for the project or advanced for full analysis in the environmental assessment presented for 30-day comment.

The environmental assessment was made available to the public for review during a designated 30-day comment period, which began on April 14, 2021 when a legal notice was published in *The Kane Republican* (newspaper of record). Three individuals submitted comments during the 30-day comment period on the environmental assessment. Comments were analyzed by the interdisciplinary team, and the comments and responses were included in the draft decision notice.

I have reviewed comments received during public scoping, those received during the 30-day comment period for the environmental assessment, and the responses to these comments composed by resource specialists on the interdisciplinary team. I truly appreciate the time and effort taken by members of the public to share their thoughts and concerns regarding this action, and I recognize that my decision may not satisfy all concerns expressed in the comments. Consistent with the record of decision for the Forest Plan (USDA-FS 2007a, page ROD-15), I believe that the proposed action balances sustainable resource use and ecological sustainability in a manner intended to satisfy competing public demands.

Findings required by other laws and regulations

My decision implements management activities and connected actions intended to develop desired conditions in the Forest Plan. As required by the National Forest Management Act section 1604(i), I find this project to be consistent with the 2007 Allegheny National Forest Land and Resource Management Plan. This decision is also in full compliance with the laws and regulations cited below, with reference to relevant page numbers in the environmental assessment.

Archaeological Resources Protection Act – Environmental assessment, pages 13–14.

Clean Air Act – Project file.

Clean Water Act – Environmental assessment, page 11.

Endangered Species Act – Project biological assessments and summarized in environmental assessment on page 14.

Environmental Justice (Executive Order 12898) – Public involvement did not identify any adversely impacted local minority or low-income populations. My decision is not expected to adversely impact minority or low-income populations.

Federal Cave Resources Protection Act – No known cave resources will be affected by my decision.

Floodplains (Executive Order 11988) – Environmental assessment, pages 11.

National Environmental Policy Act – This act requires public involvement and consideration of potential environmental effects. The entirety of documentation for this decision supports compliance with the National Environmental Policy Act.

National Historic Preservation Act – Environmental assessment, pages 13–14.

Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act – No Native American grave sites are known nor were any identified as a result of public scoping or consultation with tribal representatives.

Regional Forester Sensitive Species (Forest Service Manual 2670) – project biological evaluations and summarized in the environmental assessment on pages 9–10.

Wetlands (Executive Order 11990) – Environmental assessment, page 11.

Wild and Scenic Rivers Act – The project area does not include or affect any designated Wild and Scenic River.

Administrative Review and Objections Process

The proposed decision was subject to an objection review process pursuant to 36 CFR 218, subparts A and B. These regulations are available at: <http://www.gpo.gov/fdsys/pkg/FR-2013-03-27/pdf/2013-06857.pdf>. No objections were received during the 45-day period for the draft decision notice.

Final Decision

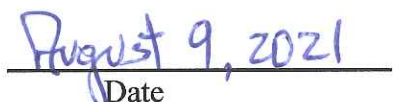
This decision may be implemented any time after the decision notice is signed.

For additional information concerning this decision, please refer to the Allegheny National Forest web site for the project at <https://www.fs.usda.gov/project/?project=57175>. You may also contact Kevin Treese, Planning Team Leader, at the Marienville Ranger Station, 131 Smokey Lane, Marienville, PA 16239 or by phone (814) 927-5759.

I, District Ranger Robert T. Fallon, am the responsible official for this decision.



ROBERT T. FALLON
District Ranger


Date

Finding of No Significant Impact

As the responsible official, I am responsible for evaluating the effects of the project relative to the definition of significance established by the CEQ Regulations (40 CFR 1508.13). I have reviewed and considered the environmental assessment and documentation included in the project record, and I have determined that the proposed action will not have a significant effect on the quality of the human environment. As a result, no environmental impact statement will be prepared. My rationale for this finding is as follows, organized by sub-section of the CEQ definition of significance cited above.

Context

For the proposed action and the no action alternatives, the context of the environmental effects is based on the environmental analysis in this environmental assessment. The Beaver Meadows Campground Decommissioning project was proposed to achieve long-term desired conditions identified in Allegheny National Forest Record of Decision for the Final Environmental Impact Statement, the Forest Plan, and the recreation facility analysis for the Allegheny National Forest. This decision will help the Forest Service align its developed recreation sites with the unique characteristics of the Allegheny National Forest, projected recreation demands, visitor expectations, and revenue opportunities. All applicable Forest Plan standards and guidelines were applied to project design.

The project area includes approximately 33 acres (less than 0.006 percent of the National Forest System lands within the Allegheny National Forest). This decision will decommission 38 developed campsites of the 829 developed campsites and cabins on the Allegheny National Forest and 1.7 miles of access roads. The project will be implemented within the next five years.

This project was designed to help achieve desired conditions identified in the Allegheny National Forest Land and Resource Management Plan (Forest Plan) and recreation facility analysis for the Allegheny National Forest. It is located within management area 3.0 (even-aged management).¹ All applicable standards and guidelines have been incorporated into the proposed action as well as project design features (see page 4–5), and implementation will help us achieve the following goals and objectives:

- Provide a diverse range of high quality, sustainable recreation opportunities consistent with public demand and resource capability emphasizing locally popular recreation places and those important to the tourism industry (USDA-FS 2007a, page 13).

Intensity

Intensity is a measure of the severity, extent, or quantity of effects and is based on information from the effects analysis of this environmental assessment and the references in the project file. I have determined that the interdisciplinary team considered the effects of this project appropriately and thoroughly with an analysis that is responsive to concerns and issues raised by the public. They took a hard look at the environmental effects (both beneficial and adverse) using relevant scientific information and their knowledge of site-specific conditions gained from field visits. Benefits of this project were not used to offset adverse impacts, and adverse impacts of this project are not significant even when separated from benefits (Environmental

¹ **Management Area 3.0 – Even-aged Management** emphasizes even-aged management to provide a forest that is a mix of predominantly shade intolerant and mid-tolerant hardwood stands of various ages and associated understories and habitat for a diversity of plant and animal species. Management Area direction can be found on pages 113–115 of the Forest Plan.

Assessment, pages 6–11). My finding of no significant impact is based on the intensity of effects using the ten factors identified in 40 CFR 1508.27(b).

1. Impacts that may be both beneficial and adverse. A significant effect may exist even if the federal agency believes that on balance the effect will be beneficial.

Effects that are beneficial or adverse are discussed on pages 6–11 of the environmental assessment. The environmental assessment, appendices, and project file also includes detailed analyses of the effects of the alternatives to vegetation and forest health; wildlife and sensitive plants; non-native invasive plants; soils and hydrology; air quality; heritage resources; recreation opportunities, forest settings and unique areas; and human health and safety. These analyses contribute to my understanding of the effects of the alternatives and confirm that there will be no significant effects to those resources (see pages 6–14 of the environmental assessment).

2. The degree to which the proposed action affects public health or safety.

Implementation of the proposed action will not result in any significant increased risks to public health and safety. The environmental assessment (page 12) considered risks to public health or safety. This decision will avoid adverse impacts to public health and safety through implementation of Forest Plan standards and guidelines, Pennsylvania best management practices, project design features, timber sale contract requirements, Office of Safety and Health Administration requirements, and standard operating safety procedures.

3. Unique characteristics of the geographic area such as the proximity to historical or cultural resources, parklands, prime farmlands, wetlands, wild and scenic rivers or ecologically critical areas.

Please see intensity factor #8 below regarding historic or cultural resources. Regarding other potentially unique characteristics:

- The proposed action is not located within, and will not affect, any of the following areas: wilderness, wilderness study areas, wild and scenic rivers, national recreation areas, scenic areas, historic areas, research natural areas, or experimental forests.
- The project area contains 24.7 acres of soils that are designated as prime farmland or farmland of statewide importance. Decommissioning roads, campsites, and other facilities will result in up to 5.3 acres of designated farmland being restored eventually to forest. None of the proposed activities will result in designated farmland being converted to non-forest or non-agricultural uses.
- There are less than 0.01 acres of wetlands in the project area. Forest Plan standards and guidelines and Pennsylvania best management practices will also be implemented to protect these areas. The project is expected to improve this wetland by allowing it to expand to a more natural area. There are no floodplains located within the project area.

4. The degree to which the effects on the quality of the human environment are likely to be highly controversial.

Although we have not decommissioned any campgrounds recently, the activities proposed here (road decommissioning, facility decommissioning, well plugging, etc.) are routine on the Allegheny National Forest and throughout the National Forest System. The effects are well known, and do not present any substantial scientific controversy.

- 5. *The degree to which the possible effects on the human environment are highly uncertain or involve unique or unknown risks.***

The activities proposed here (road decommissioning, facility decommissioning, well plugging, etc.) are routine on the Allegheny National Forest and throughout the National Forest System. The effects are well known, and do not involve highly uncertain, unique, or unknown risks.

- 6. *The degree to which the action may establish precedent for future actions with significant effects or represents a decision in principle about a future consideration.***

This project is limited to the specific activities proposed above in context of campground decommissioning. As a result, the decision made here will not establish a precedent for future actions with significant effects and will not represent a decision in principle about a future consideration.

- 7. *Whether the action is related to other actions with individually insignificant but cumulatively significant impacts. Significance exists if it is reasonable to anticipate a cumulatively significant impact on the environment. Significance cannot be avoided by terming an action temporary or by breaking it down into small component parts.***

Cumulative effects have been addressed in context of beneficial and adverse effects. Please see the discussion above for intensity factor #1.

- 8. *The degree to which the action may adversely affect districts, sites, highways, structures, or objects listed in or eligible for listing in the National Register of Historic Places or may cause loss or destruction of significant scientific, cultural, or historical resources.***

A cultural resource survey was completed for the project area and submitted to the State Historic Preservation Office for their concurrence. Concurrence from the State Historic Preservation Office was received on the *No Historic Properties Affected* finding for the project. In addition, any contracts will contain a provision for the protection of cultural resources if any sites are discovered during operations.

- 9. *The degree to which the action may adversely affect an endangered or threatened species or its habitat that has been determined to be critical under the Endangered Species Act of 1973.***

Currently, there is no designated critical habitat for any federally threatened or endangered species on the Allegheny National Forest; therefore, implementation will not affect any designated critical habitat. However, since scoping, the longsolid mussel has been proposed for federal listing as threatened. Along with the proposed listing is the designation of critical habitat for the longsolid mussel, which would include 99 miles of the Allegheny River. The longsolid mussel was analyzed as a Regional Forester Sensitive Species for this project and a “no impact” determination was reached in the project biological evaluation. Therefore, the proposed action will have no effect on the longsolid mussel or its proposed critical habitat.

Also, since scoping, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service has found that adding the monarch butterfly to the list of threatened and endangered species is warranted but precluded by work on higher-priority listing actions. With this decision, the monarch becomes a candidate for listing under the Endangered Species Act and its status will be reviewed each year until it is no longer a candidate. The monarch butterfly was analyzed as a Regional Forester Sensitive Species for this project and a “may adversely impact individuals, but not likely to result in a loss of viability in

the Planning Area, nor cause a trend toward federal listing” determination was reached in the project biological evaluation.

Project-specific biological assessments (for plants and wildlife) were prepared, are available in the project file, and are incorporated by reference. A no effect determination was reached for all nine federally listed threatened or endangered species (northern long-eared bat, small whorled pogonia, northeastern bulrush, northern riffleshell, clubshell mussel, rayed-bean, sheepnose, snuffbox, and rabbitsfoot).

10. Whether the proposed action threatens a violation of federal, state, or local law or requirements imposed for the protection of the environment.

The proposed action complies with all applicable laws, regulations, and policies.